

To CVE or Not to CVE, That Is the Question

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Overview

Countering Violent Extremism (CVE), as defined by the Department of State in a recent [CVE joint strategy document](#), “refers to proactive actions to counter efforts by violent extremists to radicalize, recruit, and mobilize followers to violence and to address specific factors that facilitate violent extremist recruitment and radicalization to violence.” Though government efforts to engage local Muslim communities in multivalent forms of “partner” arrangements to mitigate and quell the allure of violent extremism have existed for the last few years, CVE as a particular initiative represents the most comprehensive attempt to proactively address violent extremism to date. In its current incarnation, CVE is demonstrably different from what has been tried previously in the following areas:

- i) It is a global initiative, and a recent CVE Summit hosted by the White House in February drew attendance from over 60 countries. Of the countries in attendance, the United Arab Emirates has been dubbed as playing a central role as a partner to the US in developing and enacting global CVE initiatives. Since the February meeting, the UAE has already inaugurated the [Sawab Center](#) “to counter the online messaging, propaganda and recruitment by the terrorist organization known as Daesh (ISIL).”
- ii) It is a funded initiative, with the current application period for grants having just closed on September 6th of this calendar year. Headed by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), [current CVE allocation stands](#) at \$10 million dollars that will be distributed to a projected 60 grantees. Of the available \$10 million, \$3 million has been allocated for programs that help “develop resilience,” with the remaining \$7 million divided between programs designed to “challenge the narrative,” “train and engage,” “manage intervention activities,” and “build capacity.” It should be noted that DHS represents but one sector of CVE funding, as both the Justice Department and State Department [have separate mechanisms](#) for CVE funding.
- iii) Locally, CVE [enlists the](#) “help of counselors, social workers, religious figures, and other community members to intervene with people the FBI thinks are in danger of radicalizing” as part of “Shared Responsibility Committees.” In a [leaked letter](#) from the FBI directed toward potential SRC members, the details of participating in an SRC include “not consulting outside experts” without written permission from the FBI along with potentially having to sign nondisclosure agreements.
- iv) Participating entities include not only local SRCs, but a myriad of private sector organizations. During the 2015 White House CVE Summit (referenced above), Jared Cohen, the then Director of Google Ideas (now Jigsaw), [spoke](#) of Google’s desire to be “proactive” in addressing those topics that fell in the “intersection of technology and global security challenges.” Cohen later referred to an internal CVE Summit organized by Google that brought together an array of ex-terrorists to discuss the challenge of violent extremism. Prior to the February Summit, the White House released [a fact sheet](#) on CVE stating that one of the objectives of the Summit was to widen the “global base of CVE stakeholders” to include “social media solutions.” CVE pilot programs in Boston, Los Angeles, and Minnesota have made a point of incorporating private sector participation into their initiatives, with Minnesota’s CVE program drawing [funding from private sector entities](#). The Los Angeles CVE pilot has detailed as part of its [framework](#) the inclusion of “private partners, such as social media companies, film production and

public media outlets” to “help amplify positive narratives to combat extremism via social media.” At a recent Global Entrepreneurship Summit in June, Secretary of State John Kerry [called on the tech industry](#) to create new products “to tackle the enormous global challenges we face,” and has elsewhere [elicited the support](#) of Hollywood executives as part of broader CVE related efforts. Twitter [has claimed](#) to have suspended 235,000 accounts since February 2016 on terrorism-related grounds, and a recent statement by the non-profit Counter Terrorism Project [encouraged](#) other “social media companies” to “follow this example and increase their efforts to enforce their terms of service by removing extremist content.” Like Twitter, Facebook has taken to [censoring offending content](#) in a reported partnership with the Israeli government, while the [Google Transparency Project](#) has reported Google’s tight ties with the White House, [including 427 visits to the White House](#) between the start of Obama’s presidency and October 2015 as well as [a “revolving door”](#) between Google and the Obama administration. In addition to these documented formal relationships, a number of private sector non-profits have formed to discuss and develop potential policy for the next Administration. This includes the non-profit Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS) [Commission on Countering Violent Extremism](#), which is in the process of producing a “final report, aimed at breaking new ground in the way CVE is understood and practiced and influencing the next Administration’s CVE policies and approaches.” CSIS boasts as Co-Chairs of its CVE Commission Leon Panetta and Tony Blair, and includes as commissioners a General Counsel member from Google, the President of Microsoft, the Head of Global Impact Investing of Goldman Sachs, and the Co-Founder of the Tribeca Film Festival and the Tribeca Film Institute. Therefore, private sector participation a) includes a cross-section of industries including the financial sector, media, and tech, b) is already underway vis-à-vis either government solicited or independent efforts aimed at challenging what is perceived as an alluring terrorist narrative, and c) is actively being solicited by White House and State Department officials.

Given the foregoing scope of CVE, this article will endeavor to examine the contours of the current CVE discourse as it pertains to Muslims. Within this context, this article will begin by unpacking terms native to CVE including the presuppositions necessary to situate CVE as an issue of urgency, and then proceed to attend to common arguments in favor of Muslim community participation.

Violent Extremism – Not Simply a “Muslim Thing”

A necessary prerequisite for any initiative of this scale is a robust epistemological underpinning. Unfortunately, the core terms deployed in service of CVE remain fickle, disjointed, and incoherent. Take for example the term “radicalization.” Given the frequency of the use of this term, one would assume there to be an existing definition of radicalization that makes it qualitatively distinguishable from violent activity that is not an output of perceived radicalization. Alex Wilner and Claire-Jehanne Dubouloz [refer to](#) radicalization as “a personal process in which the individual adopts extreme political, social, or religious ideals and aspirations, and where the attainment of particular goals justifies the use of indiscriminate violence.” Brian Jenkins, a Senior Advisor to the President of the RAND Corporation, [described](#) radicalization before a subcommittee hearing on Intelligence, Information Sharing, and Terrorism Risk Assessment, as “internalizing a set of beliefs, a militant mindset that embraces violent jihad as the paramount test of one’s conviction.”

In order to qualify both definitions, we need to ask a few important questions. What, for example, constitutes “extreme political, social, or religious ideals and aspirations”? Or a “militant mindset”?

Countries throughout the world have leveraged these and other rather amorphous terrorist-related taxonomies as dialectical tools to quell opposition and suppress political dissent. Russia's recently ratified [Yarova Amendment](#) provides what has been [described](#) as "sweeping new powers to security forces, beefs up controls of social media and telephone calls, and broadens the definition of extremism crimes." Paul Gregory, a research fellow at the Hoover Institution, has lamented these broad powers, [stating](#) that although the amendment was "paraded before the public as an anti-terrorism measure, its real purpose is to shield the Putin regime from internal dissent and unrest." Last year China passed a new national security law which has been described as [reading](#) "more like a Communist Party ideology paper and a call to arms aimed at defending the party's grip on power." Governments throughout the world have stifled legitimate dissent and repressively castigated political opposition under the rubric of national security (see: Israel, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Brazil, Turkey, the EU, et al). Given the ever-elusive definition of extremism and its cognate radicalization alongside rampant global abuse, on what grounds can one lay claim to holding a genuine/legitimate grievance against "extreme political, social, or religious ideals and aspirations"?

The fact of the matter is that the often unspoken definition of radicalization and extremism is that it applies exclusively to acts of violence enacted by self-identified Muslim actors (or, actors which [can be depicted](#) as being Muslim by the government). Muslim actors in heterogeneous contexts, possessing an assortment of motives, and pursuing varied means to violently oppose their conflict partner are collectively conflated under the umbrella of the reductive neologism "terrorist." Following the Charleston shooting last year that left nine dead, Glenn Greenwald noted the inconsistent application of the term terrorism, [characterizing it](#) as a "completely malleable, manipulated, vapid term of propaganda that has no consistent application whatsoever."

It is difficult to argue against Greenwald's assessment. That millions of Americans grow up in a socio-cultural context that routinely and unremittingly depicts Muslims as a [conflict partner](#), "[radical Islamism](#)" as an ideological opponent, and [killing of the Muslim "other"](#) as the exclusive path for remediation, is beyond debate. Moreover, this culture of Western radicalization designed to depict Muslims as the cultural "other" has been fomented in various military circles. Islamophobia Today has [reported](#) a "crusader sub-culture" in the military today, with an increase in "Anti-Muslim/Islam and pro-Crusader themes tied to military-use paraphernalia, including: T-Shirts, insignias, bullet coating, rifle scope cases as well as tattoos inscribed 'Kafir,' and 'Infidel.'" Up thru 2012, military training [included](#) an encouragement to use "Hiroshima" tactics as part of a "total war on Islam." Also in 2012, a South Carolina-based Marine Corps squadron [reinstated](#) the controversial name "Crusader" with a cross as its insignia, reportedly telling its members that, "The enemy gets to have Allah in their fight. We need to get our Lord and Savior back into our fight." Even paramilitary contracting units have adopted this discourse, with the former CEO of Blackwater, Erik Prince, [viewing himself](#) as being tasked with the elimination of "Islam and the Muslim faith from the globe." Prince openly and frequently employed terms such as "ragheads" and "hajis" when referring to Iraqis and other Arabs whose killings he rewarded. Does none of this constitute a "militant mindset"?

And indeed, therein lies the rub: in the paradigmatic framing that predominates contemporary CVE discussions, it is only Muslims and perhaps, in a more charitable trying-not-to-be-exclusively-Muslim-framing, fringe white supremacist groups, that are capable of carrying out violent extremism. Meanwhile, drone attacks, shock-and-awe tactics, paramilitary contracting units, indefinite detention, extraordinary renditioning, and the many other tools of the powerful vs. the powerless get a pass. [Millions dead in Muslim-majority nations](#) are flippantly regarded as unavoidable civilian casualties or "[collateral damage](#)." All the while, any trenchant critique aimed at drawing attention to these basic facts results in the

hackneyed charge of anti-Americanism or radical sympathizing. The outcome of such a discourse necessarily limits the scope of “violent extremism” to Muslims alone. Given this presumptive basis, Muslims are depicted as uniquely possessing the ability to carry out egregious violence, and it is on this account that we are held responsible to self-police our communities.

Muslims should – and indeed, must – reject this terror framing of their faith. The fact is that if we use “violent extremism” as a conceptual category encompassing all acts of violence, then violent acts carried out by self-identified Muslims would be put into proper perspective relative to the many more common ways in which everyday Americans are [victims of daily violence](#). This, in turn, could perhaps reduce the anti-Muslim hysteria that continues to dominate certain segments of society. Moreover, we would begin to address more critically the wanton violence carried out by both state and non-state actors, and perhaps ask why so many purportedly “advanced” and “civilized” nations in the West have taken to the military option and global violence.

Stigmatization, *even within* an Establishment Framing

For arguments sake, let us accept the establishment framing of “terrorism” and “radicalization” as an act only carried out by actors inspired by jihadist groups (i.e. Daesh/ISIL, AlQaeda, the Taliban, etc.) or fringe fanatics in the US (radical leftists, right-wing extremists, etc.). Would, within this revised framing, CVE be a laudable program worth pursuing? The answer remains a resounding “no.” Even in this already narrow and politically-motivated definition of “terrorism,” CVE deputizes and stigmatizes Muslims *alone* with only lip-service directed toward non-Muslim terror threats.

In a recent subcommittee hearing held by the House Homeland Security Committee (HSC) entitled “[Identifying the Enemy: Radical Islamist Terror](#),” George Selim, the Director of the [Office for Community Partnerships](#) for the DHS and head of the DHS CVE Task Force, [testified concerning](#) the current state of CVE. At multiple points in the hearing, congressional inquiry revolved around CVE scope. Following his initial testimony, Rep. Bonnie Watson Coleman asked Selim about non-Muslim NGOs that have been involved with CVE. Despite his insistence that him and his staff work with a “range” of NGOs in countering domestic terrorism that are not Muslim, Selim failed to name a single non-Muslim NGO. Rep. Bennie Thompson later asked Selim about right-wing terror groups and other ideologies that motivate domestic violence, ones that statistically [represent a much greater threat](#) to the homeland than Daesh/ISIL. In response, Selim cited Secretary of the DHS Jeh Johnson as having stated that the “preeminent threat to our homeland security today is ISIL’s ability to recruit and radicalize,” a claim that Rep. Thompson went on to flatly reject, referring to reports highlighting non-Muslim sources of violent extremism as “irrefutably” worse and more threatening than Daesh/ISIL.

If there remained any doubt about the exclusively-Muslim framing of CVE, Selim quickly extinguished it in the coming set of questions when asked by Rep. Scott Perry whether or not white supremacist groups in general, and the KKK in particular, would represent an ideologically extreme group whose thought CVE would seek to preempt or counteract. Though he initially responded generically, over time Selim all but conceded that such groups would not be in scope (Perry characterized his response as saying “essentially no”), repeating his prior statement that the “preeminent threat to the homeland today is ISIL’s ability to recruit and radicalize.”

In short, CVE efforts are solely concerned with Muslim “radicalization” and if the recent HSC hearing is any indication, government officials are making little effort to conceal that fact.

The Numbers

CVE programs also presuppose another critical yet entirely unsubstantiated claim: that violent extremism is indeed a significant problem. In his work *The Missing Martyrs*, Charles Kurzman examines the global death toll that has resulted from Muslim terror plots and in contrast to popular discussions on the topic, inquires as to what accounts for the decidedly low rate of Muslims carrying out terror attacks. Published in 2011, Kurzman states that at the time of his writing, “Global Islamist terrorists have managed to recruit fewer than one in 15,000 Muslims over the past quarter-century and fewer than one in 100,000 Muslims since 9/11.” In a 2011 interview, Kurzman [says about](#) terror acts conducted in the US, “Muslim American terrorist plots have killed since 9/11 —since the 3,000 killed on 9/11 —have killed 33 individuals in the United States since that time. Over that same period of time, there have been more than 150,000 murders in the United States, or 14 or 15,000 murders every year. Muslim American terrorism, then, has been a very small, very low percentage of the overall violence in the United States.” Other studies have since [corroborated](#) this count. Even if we incorporate into Kurzman’s initial assessment the emerging population of Daesh/ISIL, we are still left with a diminutive fragment of the global Muslim population. Estimates have differed dramatically over Daesh/ISIL’s real membership, with the [highest estimates](#) reporting up to 100,000 members. Though such a number may seem high at first glance (a number which was, incidentally, established by way of “foreign observers” and is more than triple [CIA estimates](#)), it can be contextualized more easily when juxtaposed against Chicago’s [150,000 gang member population](#), and [a total of 1.4 million gang members across the United States](#). In addition to the aforementioned numbers of Daesh/ISIL members, ISIS prosecutions in the US have relied extensively on cases encouraged by informants or undercover agents. In a [study produced](#) by Fordham Law’s Center on National Security analyzing ISIS prosecutions in the United States, 59% of all ISIS prosecutions in the US were determined to have involved informants or undercover agents (this, out of a paltry 101 cases in total).

Given these relatively sparse numbers – particularly within the continental United States – one must wonder the likelihood of thwarting violent extremism by deputizing imams and community leaders, a likelihood that becomes even less probable when one considers further factors that I will discuss in the ensuing sections.

Identifying Causes

In 2004, the Pentagon’s Defense Science Board [published a 102-page report](#) concerning America’s standing in the global war of ideas. Tasked with investigating global opinion about America, the report [stated](#) that “American direct intervention in the Muslim World has paradoxically elevated the stature of and support for radical Islamists, while diminishing support for the United States to single-digits in some Arab societies,” concluding that “Muslims do not hate our freedoms, but rather, they hate our policies.” Since this early Bush-era study, a number of subsequent studies have arrived at much the same conclusion. Dr. Robert Pape, a political scientist at the University of Chicago and founder of the Chicago Project on Security and Terrorism, has been lauded for completing the most comprehensive examination of suicide attacks to date, investigating over 4,600 global suicide attacks since 1980. Pape [concludes](#) that, “What 95 percent of all suicide attacks have in common, since 1980, is not religion, but a specific strategic motivation to respond to a military intervention, often specifically a military occupation, of territory that the terrorists view as their homeland or prize greatly.” Kruger and Maleckova’s “Education, Poverty and Terrorism: Is There a Causal Connection?” disproves popularly held beliefs about terrorism being motivated by economic disenfranchisement and a lack of education, stating that “any connection between poverty, education and terrorism is indirect, complicated and probably quite weak. Instead of viewing terrorism as a direct response to low market opportunities or ignorance, we suggest it is more accurately viewed as a response to political conditions and long-standing feelings of indignity and frustration that have little to do with economics.”

In a 2013 Senate hearing on targeted killings and the use of drones, 23-year old Farea al-Muslimi spoke about his village named Wessab in Yemen that had been subject to drone attacks just six days prior to the hearing. In a moving testimony, al-Muslimi [said with respect to the recent drone strikes](#): “What radicals had previously failed to achieve in my village, one drone strike accomplished in an instant.” That violent extremism is inspired by an opposition to Western interventionism (as a primary reason, though there may be secondary contributing factors, of course) is attested to in just about every serious scholarly study of terrorism and predominates as the reason for said violence by terrorists themselves. This does not foreclose on the possibility that some join for other reasons, such as ex-Daesh/ISIL members who [confessed to not knowing](#) exactly why they joined, though of course these individuals represent more of an exception than the norm. In response to the “conveyor belt” theory of radicalization that views violent extremism as the logical outcome of an anti-Western religiously-motivated ideology, [a 2010 study states](#), “The proportion moving from radical ideas to radical action is small, and the proportion moving from legal activism to radical action and terrorism may be even smaller. Certainly the proportions are too small to support the metaphor of a ‘conveyor belt’ (Baran, 2004) with its implication of an inevitable end for anyone who steps onto the belt.” In examining potentially religious motivations, the same study states, “Hussain Osman, arrested in connection with the 7/21 attempted bombing in London, reportedly told his Italian interrogator that, ‘Religion had nothing to do with this. We watched films. We were shown videos with images of the war in Iraq. We were told we must do something big. That’s why we met’ (Leppard & Follain, 2005). Osama bin Laden’s speeches offer another clue. He emphasizes Muslim grievances against the U.S. – support for authoritarian Muslim leaders, support for Israel, U.S. troops in Muslim countries – but spends little time selling the global caliphate that he asserts is the answer to these grievances.” Patrick Eddington of the Cato Institute echoes many of these points in his assessment of a recent House Homeland Security Committee (HSC) [memo, stating](#) that “Neither President Obama nor the authors of the HSC report can bring themselves to admit that our own actions in the Middle East and Southwest Asia have helped to fuel the very terrorist violence and domestic recruiting efforts both decried this week.”

Critics of this narrative tend to cast those maintaining the aforementioned causes for terrorism as blaming the West, or being reductive in consigning terrorist motivations to a monocausal explanation. Yet nothing could be further from the truth. The question is not one of blame, but one of acknowledging reality: so long as the structural realities that inform terrorism are not addressed, it is unlikely that any global CVE program can socially engineer people prone to radicalization (assuming we are even capable of distinguishing such a predisposition from normal teenage angst) into thinking themselves out of it. As University of Massachusetts professor John Horgan put it in a [recent article](#), “we delude ourselves into thinking that we can somehow cure the problem through deradicalization programs that in many cases have a track record of failure around the world.”

In spite of the abundance of available research arguing the contrary, popular notions of an ideological struggle remain the paradigm of choice from which the vast majority of CVE discussions emerge. Accordingly, Muslims and others are told that if they merely challenge existing narratives, or produce an intellectually compelling counter-narrative, the lure of violent extremism can indeed be abated. In this vein, Muslims are encouraged to champion liberal values and foster hollow notions of patriotism as an inoculation against this purported ideological incubator. The fact that government-clerical alliances, silence over Western interventionism, and efforts to recast religion in terms palatable to Western liberalism have only served as recruiting instruments by terrorist actors defies simplistic “counter narrative” efforts and renders them, at best, ineffectual, and at worst, counterproductive.

State-Sponsored Religion

Inherent in the “counter narrative” discourse is a second, perhaps more problematic aspect, particularly for orthodox religious adherents: selectively endorsing particular ideological persuasions – often way outside the Islamic mainstream – over others. Advocates of CVE frequently make explicit use of this method, arguing that the West in general, and America in particular, has a responsibility to endorse – both overtly and covertly – interpretations of Islam that coincide with contemporary liberal and Western socio-cultural norms. As law professor Samuel Roscoff [notes](#) in his “Establishing Official Islam? The Law and Strategy of Counter-Radicalization”:

“For the government to formulate (or to pick out from among rival options) and endorse a preferred conception of Islam—in effect to play the role of theologian and missionary—raises potentially serious concerns rooted in the Establishment Clause and the values it enshrines. That the government has proved capable of shaping religious beliefs and practices in the past, sometimes with a distinctly heavy hand, hardly supplies a compelling legal foundation for the present preoccupation with Official Islam.”

Effective “counter narratives,” therefore, do not simply require a reconfigured conception of *jihād*, but also of Muslim gender norms, sexual ethics, a commitment to Western “freedoms,” and related views to which Muslims must either subordinate themselves or risk being labeled “extreme.” As Mohamed Ghilan stated in [a recent article](#), “CVE is not just about deputizing Muslims for law enforcement...It is about a greater effort to reshape Islam as a religion so it is rendered deaf, mute, and blind after it had previously been packaged for Afghanistan in a way that focused on its armed resistance aspect. It is about how we as Muslims think of our own agency, our religion, and our role in the world.” A number of Muslims have buckled, wittingly or unwittingly, to such political pressure and are now eagerly recasting Islam in accordance with the good Muslim/bad Muslim binary in which the “good Muslim” practices an inoffensive brand of Islam that aligns with the sensibilities of upper class white America. The “bad Muslim” other in this scenario includes all following mainstream Islamic interpretations, as well as those more specifically aligned with Salafism, the Muslim Brotherhood, Jama’ati Islami, Deoband, and even certain Sufi trends (this is of course not an exhaustive list), at least insofar as such individuals and groups attempt to assert their religious understandings – particularly those that conflict with contemporary liberal discourse – beyond the confines of their communal enclaves. Commenting on this good Muslim/bad Muslim binary in his book *Islamophobia/Islamophilia: Beyond the Politics of Enemy and Friend*, Andrew Shryock remarks:

“The “good Muslim,” as a stereotype, has common features: he tends to be a Sufi (ideally, one who reads Rumi); he is peaceful (and assures us that jihad is an inner, spiritual contest, not a struggle to “enjoin the good and forbid the wrong” through force of arms); he treats women as equals, and is committed to choice in matters of hijab wearing (and never advocates the covering of a woman’s face); if he is a she, then she is highly educated, works outside the home, is her husband’s only wife, chose her husband freely, and wears hijab (if at all) only because she wants to. The good Muslim is also a pluralist (recalls fondly the ecumenical virtues of medieval Andalusia and is a champion of interfaith activism); he is politically moderate (an advocate of democracy, human rights, and religious freedom, an opponent of armed conflict against the U.S. and Israel); finally, he is likely to be an African, a South Asian, or, more likely still, an Indonesian or Malaysian; he is less likely to be an Arab, but, as friends of the “good Muslim” will point out, only a small proportion of Muslims are Arab anyway.....Of course, these traits are lacking in millions of real Muslims as well, but it is not their empirical presence or absence that matters as much as the moral connotations these traits carry when they are used to define the modern, safe, and acceptable Muslim.”

By comparison, the “bad Muslim” is merely tolerated, provided that he harbors his beliefs internally. The “bad Muslim” is not celebrated as part of the internal diversity of Islam and is generally excluded from having his voice represented in policy discussions interested in furthering this moderate Muslim “counter narrative.”

Muslims Need to “Assume Responsibility”

A common retort to the foregoing list of concerns by well-intentioned Muslim Americans is that Muslims in fact need to assume a type of responsibility for responding to the narrative of Daesh/ISIL. This call is echoed by conservative media pundits, and President Obama has [repeatedly enlisted](#) the assistance of Muslim allies to reject Daesh/ISIL’s “twisted interpretation” of Islam. That said, it is unclear what more Muslims can do. [Lists](#) abound with everyone from local Muslim leaders, masjid, and MSA’s to grand muftis and heads of state unequivocally condemning Daesh/ISIL. Indeed, even leading Salafist Jihadist voices like Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi have [denounced](#) Daesh/ISIL as “deviant” and against the principles of both Islam and the Sharia. As Muslim scholar Jonathan Brown has [noted](#), this persistent demand for Muslims to “assume responsibility” or “do more to condemn terrorism” defies not only the overwhelming, pervasive, and ceaseless stream of condemnations emanating from Muslims globally, but is in fact designed to distract from the parlous effects of more than a decade of failed policies.

The assumption of local responsibility also assumes that local leaders possess a unique insight into the psychology of congregants. Family members of the Orlando and San Bernardino shooters [have reacted](#) as “shocked” by said shootings, and if even those closest to violent extremists – their parents, siblings, and best friends – testify as being stunned by the actions of their relative and/or friend, then what chance do local communities have of “de-radicalizing” individuals who display no discernable outward indicators, are often completely disengaged from Muslim communities, and demonstrate little to no [literacy](#) of Islam itself?

A Seat at the Table

More honest proponents of CVE within the Muslim community concede its problematic framing and remain skeptical of its ability to achieve its intended aims. Nonetheless, Muslim community participation is said to be essential not to somehow guide an initiative that will dispel violent extremism, but to feel included and participate as part of a process from the inside. This has been characterized as “having a seat at the table,” arguing that so long as Muslims want to be taken seriously and have their concerns heard, they need to be at the table to inform critical policy discussions.

Of course, this “seat at the table” narrative is not universally endorsed in other contexts. Despite 29% of Americans self-identifying as Republican, no mainstream Muslim leader has encouraged working alongside the Trump campaign. Instead, many Muslim leaders and communities have gone out of their way to reject the Trump campaign rather than assume a “seat at the table.” This has been premised upon a recognition that Donald Trump’s [public statements](#) about Islam and Muslims have been so caustic, and his policy proposals, even as a matter of theoretical debate, so damaging, that any perceived alliance, no matter how shallow or symbolic, cannot be seriously entertained. In short, the harms far outweigh the benefits.

Unfortunately, such calculus hardly factors into determining whether the CVE table is worth sitting at. With few discernable benefits and plenty of evident harms, CVE engagement deputizes Muslims to serve at the behest of the national security state, securitizes Muslim communities, further entrenches into the Muslim psyche a self-conception that associates Islam with terrorism, and risks alienating disenfranchised and politically frustrated Muslims.

Being Proactive, Not Reactive

The rhetoric of “getting proactive” to advance law and order has been mobilized against minority communities for decades. Designed to disguise otherwise prejudicial policies, both domestic and international “proactive” efforts have largely resulted in the sustained marginalization and disenfranchisement of minorities. Perhaps the best example of this has been the proactive policing of black communities for decades, a policy which has been dubbed by race advocates like Michelle Alexander as representing a “[New Jim Crow](#)” within which black males in particular find themselves on the receiving end of racial stigmatization and victims of a judicial system with draconian mandatory sentencing requirements for, in many instances, little more than petty drug possession. These programs, enacted under a “broken windows” philosophy of policing, [sought to remove](#) “visible signs of social disorder...by using police resources both for vigorous enforcement of laws on minor ‘quality of life’ offenses, while aggressively interdicting citizens in an intensive and widespread search for weapons.” In a report examining this “broken windows” policing method, professors at Columbia University [concluded that](#) such an approach did little to “reduce crime or disorder” while simultaneously threatening to “undermine police legitimacy and diminish the social good of policing.” That African Americans now [comprise](#) roughly half of the US prison population, are incarcerated at roughly six times the rate of whites, and disproportionately find their youth subject to arrests, judicially waved to criminal court, and admitted to state prisons is the rotten fruit that this “proactive” policy has sown.

Like the proactive methods employed against black communities for decades, the aftermath of 9/11 resulted in a full-throated endorsement of global proactive policing of the new terror threat. In discussing this preventive shift, Jules Lobel remarks in his “Preventive Paradigm and the Perils of Ad Hoc Policing” that the Bush administration had “invoked this sweeping new preventive paradigm to justify the coercive use of state power to preventively detain suspected terrorists, to engage in extraordinary rendition of suspects to foreign states, to interrogate detainees, and to go to war against Iraq.” In laying out the troubles of pursuing an expanded proactive strategy, Lobel notes that preventive strategies involve a fair amount of speculation about future events and intentions. Permitting the government to undertake consequential action on the basis of speculation and probability analysis is simply a bad idea, and has yielded little success and lots of damage.

Muslim Americans now find themselves on the receiving end of a comprehensive and prejudicial policy that stigmatizes their youth and men, targeting them, monitoring their communities, and securitizing their sacred spaces in CVE (though of course much of this has been well underway before the advent of CVE). Far from actually reducing crime or the allure of violent extremism, CVE programs create a wedge between civilians and law enforcement, engender distrust between community members and CVE-affiliated leaders and organizations, and risk further stigmatizing an already beleaguered Muslim community. Muslim leaders should be wary of adopting such “proactive” rhetoric and think long and hard before signing up themselves and their communities for this paradigm of government-civil relations.

Ultimately Ineffectual

In a report entitled “Countering Violent Extremism: Myth and Fact,” the NYU Brennan Center for Justice [recounts](#) various CVE programs that have been tried in the United Kingdom, Europe, Kenya, Indonesia, and Australia, stating that the efforts have often been “harmful and counterproductive.” Another report published in September 2015 by Human Rights First [details](#) rampant CVE abuse and repression of political dissent by many key CVE allies including Bahrain, Egypt, Kenya, and others. Far from reducing the allure of terrorism, the report notes that “security efforts rife with human rights violations undermine security and encourage violent extremism.” Marshalling the conclusions of such studies, a joint statement

released by 41 humanitarian and peacebuilding organizations [states](#) that CVE strategy “risks repeating the same mistakes as other post-9/11 stabilization initiatives: prioritizing securitized responses over investments to address the structural causes of instability, and coupling the two lines of effort creating confusion and working at cross purposes.”

In addition, invasive monitoring programs have been cited as obfuscated intelligence work rather than enlightening such efforts. Former FBI agent Michael German writes in [a recent article](#):

“The fact is: opening the intelligence collection spigot has left the FBI and other intelligence agencies [drowning](#) in irrelevant information. One federal [review](#) of the FBI’s pre-attack investigation of Ft. Hood shooter Nidal Hasan, for example, argued this “data explosion” contributed to the investigators’ inability to identify all of Hasan’s relevant communications sitting in FBI databases.

But the increasing data collection is only half the problem. Since 9/11, the Justice Department has repeatedly [expanded](#) the FBI’s authorities, making it easier to initiate investigations with less evidence. These lowered standards, combined with ill-conceived “see something, say something” campaigns and “no leads go uncovered” policies, vastly increase the agent workload and divert investigative resources to cases with the least evidence indicating a criminal or terrorist threat.”

That counter radicalization programming has existed globally for over a decade and not a single model exists that can be pointed to as having yielded any serious success calls into question whether there can, even in principle, be a CVE program that effectively mitigates violent extremism. Given the relatively low numbers of violent extremists, contributing geopolitical factors which are deemed beyond the scope of CVE efforts, the glut of (irrelevant) monitoring and intelligence metadata already being collected, and the relative ease with which violent extremism can be carried out, it bears to be asked whether a “solution” for violent extremism exists. Rebranding or rhetorically altering CVE messaging to render it less offensive to Muslim sensibilities should not be seen as novel or likely to produce results that meaningfully depart from the many failed CVE efforts both here in the U.S. and around the globe.

A Path Forward

Now more than ever, Muslim Americans need to collaboratively determine the fault lines that govern their relationship with the state. An uncompromisingly apolitical posture is highly unlikely for a community as diverse as Muslim America, and such a posture – one cordoned off from any meaningful engagement with the state absent ideal circumstances – cannot be the alternative offered by critics of CVE. Instead, Muslim Americans should work in local communities to build healthy relationships with local law enforcement within a defined scope, and in certain contexts engage government organizations concerned with national security.

That said, CVE is a program that Muslim Americans, in light of the aforementioned considerations, should abstain from endorsing or affiliating with. Abstaining from CVE should not be characterized as “boycotting” the government. CVE is not “just another form of political engagement,” and many Muslims have erroneously conflated CVE within a prior engagement/disengagement paradigm which included things like the White House Iftar and Muslim Leadership Initiative (MLI). CVE is different, and should be treated as such.

Modifying the vocabulary of prejudice does not render discriminatory policies objective. Adding in a few token white supremacist groups and peripheral fanatics to the scope of CVE also does not alter the fact of what CVE is and what it is designed to do. Muslim Americans stand to have their religious liberties

curtailed, their civic freedoms diluted, and their religious identities forever associated with terror and violence by pursuing CVE grants and endorsing the CVE agenda.